

MCC Committee on Women's Concerns report



Report No. 58, November-December 1984

Women and Body Image

by Christine Derstine

The material for this issue has been growing inside me for a long time, probably since I was a little girl. It has been a difficult pregnancy, and the birth of this newsletter is no easier or quicker than the birth of my first child. (Both were overdue.)

Over the years I became aware of the separation I felt between my spirit and body. This separation allowed me to function under the illusion that I could hate my body without recognizing that I indeed was hating myself. As I became older I gradually discovered the universality of this phenomenon among women—or at least among white women in North America.

Women try to separate and disown part of our bodies without recognizing the rejection and lack of acceptance this split reflects. At this point you may be saying: what is she talking about? This is not true for me! Perhaps it isn't. Even so, answer the following questions:

Do you like your body the way it is?

Is there anything you would like to change about your body?

Do you take delight in your body?

Do you feel like a failure or inadequate because of your appearance?

Do you value your feminine processes—ovulation, menses, pregnancy, arousal?

Do you feel attractive?

Is the real you hidden in your body?

Is your head more important than the rest of your body?

How many women do you know who like their bodies and don't want to change them?

Rare is the woman who feels comfortable with her body and doesn't want to change it in some way. Generally, we as women do not like our bodies. It is much easier to say what we *don't* like than what we *do* like.

Some of us wonder if it is okay to like our body at all.

Unconsciously or consciously, we have thought of the body as evil. In the interpreting of the Garden of Eden story, the impression remains that of Eve seducing Adam and causing him to disobey—rather than the more accurate reading of the snake seducing Eve, resulting in *both* Adam and Eve disobeying God. Whatever our personal reading of the story has been, the former impression is dominant in our culture.

Our society bombards us with images of body perfect women, as well as with guides of how to achieve this perfection. These images and impressions are everywhere we turn: movies, television, magazines, billboards, radio. Advertisers play on our vulnerabilities.

From little on up we are taught to view our bodies as observers. We compare ourselves to the ideal and find ourselves lacking. We are fatter, rounder, uglier, rarely thinner than this mythical media ideal. This notion of the ideal feminine form contributes greatly to the body/spirit split we are so capable of maintaining.

Another reason we are able to maintain this split is the lack of positive feminine images. In our Judeo-Christian tradition we do not have a strong feminine image of God. Although we are told that we are created in the image of God—male and female—the strongest image of God evoked in the Bible is that of father. Women do not have a strong feminine image that gives affirmation of our femaleness.

The purpose of this issue is to raise awareness of how our attitudes to and images of our bodies affect us—and hopefully to start healing the damage this unnatural split fosters.

Christine Derstine and her husband Philip Martin live in Kitchener, Ontario. She is a recent mother and graduate of the University of Waterloo. She is attempting to keep body and soul together while pursuing seminary studies and creative movement.

Body Image and Eating Disorders

by Christine Derstine

"Body image" and "eating disorders" are closely connected. A distorted body image is a common characteristic in all eating disorders. Usually people do not perceive their body accurately. For example, in anorexia nervosa a girl may look like a skeleton and be dying of starvation, and yet in her eyes she is fat.

In obesity, women prefer not to know how they look. They will narrow the focus of awareness so as not to see. Images in photographs or different mirrors penetrate the usual censoring of awareness.

Most women are concerned about their weight, whether or not they are affected by an eating disorder. This dissatisfaction with present weight is often a result of the emphasis on thinness as an ideal for women. Eating disorders reflect our society's compulsion with slenderness taken to an extreme.

I think eating disorders are on a continuum, all being responses to life situations by focusing on food. While anorexia nervosa and obesity may seem to have nothing in common, they are in fact flip sides of a coin.

Formation of Body Image

To clarify what is meant by body image, I will draw from the writings of Hilde Bruch, a doctor who has specialized for over 35 years in working with persons suffering from anorexia nervosa and obesity. In her book *Eating Disorders* she writes:

Body image is the picture of our own body which we form in our mind—the way the body appears to ourselves. This image is shaped by our own experience as well as by parental attitudes.

There is speculation that body image in some way preceded and determined body structure. Bruch came to the conclusion that:

Misinterpretation of internal and external stimuli and the sense of control and ownership of the body needed to be included in the concept of body awareness or body identity.

She goes on to say that her study brought strikingly into the open

...the extent to which social attitudes toward the body, the concept of beauty in our society, and our preoccupation with appearance enter into the picture. The obsession of the Western world with slimness, the condemnation of any degree of overweight as undesirable and ugly, may well be considered a distortion of the social body concept, but it dominates present day living.

Eating Disorders Defined

At this point it would be helpful to talk about eating disorders. In this article I refer mainly to anorexia nervosa and compulsive eating. Anorexia nervosa is the term used to describe self-starvation in pursuit of thinness. These people do not suffer from loss of appetite, but willingly control hunger urges in their fear of being fat. Usually the low food intake is combined with a rigorous exercise program.

Therapist Steven Levenkron in his book *Treating and Overcoming Anorexia Nervosa* has organized disordered eating into three categories:

Intake Limiting - This kind of anorexia nervosa includes extremely low intake of calories (300-600 per day). ...often low fluid intake. Full stomach is equated with obesity. Sensations of the stomach such as gas gurgling, fullness and pain are experienced in a highly exaggerated manner. Fear of overeating as well as abdominal distention are added factors.

Anorexia/bulimia - This is characterized by alternating bouts of starving and overeating. These cycles vary in length. Some individuals starve all day, only to eat for hours at night. Also common is a cycle of one to several days of near-fasting followed by a day of heavy eating.

Bulimarexia - This term describes those who consume up to 15,000 calories in a day but vomit nearly all of it up to avoid weight gain. Individuals in this group vary from emaciated to normal. Although their eating practices differ from those of the first two groups, their thought processes and obsessions with eating and weight are similar. They become attached and addicted to vomiting.

One disorder that does not have a strict definition is *compulsive eating*. Often these people recognize the difference between real hunger and the neurotic need for food. Often they are aware that they eat when they feel worried and tense. They feel less effective and competent when they try to control their food intake (Bruch).

Susie Orbach defines what it has meant for women who have suffered from compulsive eating:

Eating when you are not physically hungry. Feeling out of control around food. Spending a good deal of time thinking and worrying about food and fatness. Scouring the latest diet for vital information. Feeling awful about yourself as someone who is out of control. Feeling awful about your body.

A Cultural Disease?

We as women struggle against a societal projection of an ideal that does not have a basis in reality. Therefore we are trying to attain something that is not possible for many. To attain what our culture says is feminine may actually be a denial of the feminine. And we become hopelessly trapped in the struggle.

In a recent column in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* (Oct. 20, 1984), Judith Finlayson quotes from psychologist Janet L. Surrey's paper, "Eating Patterns as a Reflection of Women's Development": "our current fat phobia constitutes a cultural disease which can actually be the cause of women's psychological problems."

Surrey's first point is that

...the medical model for understanding obesity and

and weight loss was based on male body types and physiology. This means many women were destined to fight a lifelong battle trying to conform to an ideal which is at odds with their own set point—the natural level of fat/lean body ratio. Success means conquering nature and achieving the cultural ideal of thin.

This goal is often achieved at the cost of psychological well-being. The more one tries to conform to external standards, the less one is likely to be aware of one's inner needs. The successful dieter also becomes accustomed to a deprivation mentality where self-esteem becomes equated with how well one is doing controlling food intake. Thus in a more general sense, self-esteem becomes bound up in controlling one's own appetites, instincts and needs. . . finally effectiveness comes to represent the ability to control rather than express oneself.

Even so, unsuccessful dieters are not much better off. Failure to achieve the cultural ideal can produce feelings of low self-esteem. Ultimately a chronic sense of deficiency may become basic to a young one's sense of self.

Anorexia is a condition where the mind struggles against the body, even to the point of death. As Kim Chernin puts it, anorexia is

...an illness of self-division, tragic splitting of body from mind. But most women admire the success of anorexic efforts to impose upon the natural body a shape and form which is the product of culture and reflects the power of the mind.

In Susie Orbach's book, *Fat as a Feminist Issue*, she says that

...overeating and obesity have been reduced to character defects, rather than perceived as the expression of painful and conflicting experiences. Furthermore, rather than attempting to uncover and confront women's bad feelings about their bodies or toward food, professionals concerned themselves with the problem of how to get women thin.

Nurture and Intimacy

In thinking of how to put this newsletter together, I talked with Sunny Sunberg, a counselor with University of Waterloo's Health and Safety Office. She specializes in counselling on an individual and group basis with persons who have eating disorders.

"The successful dieter also becomes accustomed to a deprivation mentality where self-esteem becomes equated with how well one is doing controlling food intake. Thus, self-esteem becomes bound up in controlling one's own appetites, instincts and needs. . . finally effectiveness comes to represent the ability to control rather than express oneself."

Sunberg asks the question, "What does it mean for us to be preoccupied with food in a land of plenty?" In her viewpoint, two important things to consider are *nurture* and *intimacy*. How is it that we nurture ourselves? Food and nurture are so closely linked. When we want to get together to talk with a friend we say, "Let's get together for coffee or for lunch." It is hard for us to differentiate our needs.

We also don't know how to be intimate. Our language itself makes it difficult to express caring. We have few words for love—i.e., love, like, affection, caring. We say "I love that movie," "I love the dress," "I love you." Compare this to the Inuit, who have 26 words for snow. We struggle to find ways to nurture ourselves and to express and be intimate with each other.

In Summary

Eating disorders are a painful response to the complexity of living in the 20th century. In a culture that equates femininity with thinness, women are trying to hold together an ideal that forces the development of the body/mind split. As women we need to realize the falseness of this cultural ideal.

To quote again from Kim Chernin,

Fat or thin, voluptuous or lean, full or angular, a woman's authentic beauty first comes into existence when her body expresses her self-acceptance—the harmony or the condition of fuller conscious creative struggle she has achieved within herself.

"Our current fat phobia constitutes a cultural disease which can actually be the cause of women's psychological problems."

For Further Reading

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Orbach, Susie. *Fat is a Feminist Issue: A Selfhelp Guide for Compulsive Eaters*. Berkley Books, 1978.

The following titles are written from a Jungian perspective.

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In Her Own Image

by Susan Shantz

I am a visual artist and former student of art history. I have been asked to comment on "Visual Images of Women." So my first impulse is to leaf through the encyclopedia of paintings and sculptures imprinted on my mind from numerous art history lectures and texts. That the image of woman is a favored theme in Western art is quickly apparent, as is her frequent portrayal as "Madonna" or "the female nude."

This vocabulary of art images, however, is a relatively recent acquisition for me. If I search for the images preceding these, I find the flawless magazine models that dominated the impressionable years of adolescence.

Like the images of art history, the images of popular culture present women as objects of idealized beauty. Few people in our society are immune to the impact of media and advertising, and even subcultures like Mennonites (whose ideologies may differ) have succumbed to media pressures. As a result women are often dissatisfied with their bodies, which never conform to fluctuating ideals of beauty.

Platonic Influences

In order to understand the source of the Western image of female beauty, it is necessary to return to early Greek thought. Especially pertinent are the Aristotelian belief that art should complete a corrupted nature and the Platonic doctrine of ideal forms.

Greek artists, who viewed the human body as the most perfect of all forms, made it even more perfect by combining ideal parts (arms, legs, torso, etc.) into a superhuman whole that met mathematically conceived proportions of balance and harmony. Plato's praise of the Celestial as opposed to the Vulgar nature of the goddess Aphrodite laid the foundation for the glorified images of women that became the aim of Western classical art.

Platonic dualism is also at the root of the Christian denial of the body which, in the early centuries of Christianity, brought an end to the classical affirmation of the body. During the Middle Ages, there was little sense that a celestial soul could inhabit a form so vulgar as the body. Thus, when the classical body was recovered in the Renaissance, it emerged again in its ideal form.

In the Renaissance framework, images of women portrayed her as Madonna within accepted Christian iconographic traditions—or, under the pretext of classical allegory, painted her nude in a landscape setting (where she functioned as a symbol of nature and generative life). Unlike the male nude, which might convey character, the female nude could only aspire to beauty; this belief became the dominant aesthetic norm after the late 18th century.

Artists who dared to paint the female nude with a face that conveyed personality were severely criticized

for breaking accepted conventions and shocking the public. Rembrandt, who painted unidealized female bodies filled with a sense of inner life, is perhaps an exception. The Northern European tradition—of which Rembrandt was a part—aspired to greater truth than was permitted in the classical abstraction of the Southern Renaissance. Most often, the female body was presented as a formal element displayed for the scrutiny of the viewer.



"Rembrandt. Old Woman Bathing Her Feet. 17th century. Rembrandt painted unidealized female bodies filled with a sense of inner life." (Clark, *The Nude*, p. 341, plate 274.)

Ways of Seeing

Some of the social implications of these images of women are pointed out by John Berger in his book entitled *Ways of Seeing*. Berger juxtaposes paintings of women from Western art history with contemporary photographs of women in advertisements and sex magazines. The similarities of posture, gesture and glance are shocking, forcing one to realize that the female body has been used as an "object d'art" to convey an idealized type to a selected audience.

"Berger juxtaposes paintings of women from Western art history with contemporary photographs of women in advertisements and sex magazines. The similarities of posture, gesture and glance are shocking..."

How much we have come to accept these images is brought home by the incongruity that results if we follow Berger's suggestion and imagine a male figure in each painting or magazine photograph. These images of women have largely been created by men for men, with the result that women "watch themselves being looked at."

How many of the paintings or media photographs portray women who are unself-consciously absorbed in meaningful activity? Instead, the formal presentation of ever-changing ideals of beauty falsifies a woman's sense of her own physical and psychic self.

To recognize that the historical images of women as well as those with which we are daily confronted are untrue is a beginning. But if we are to change our attitudes toward female bodies, there is a need for new images to replace the old.

While media images will be slow to change, women artists who are gaining a recognition previously denied them paint and sculpt the female figure with a new sensitivity and awareness. Their self-portraits reveal the honesty of aging and of changing body shapes, and their images of motherhood are less sentimentalized than those of the past. The female body, expressive of personality, is treated in its unidealized forms and at various stages of development.

These new images are needed to allow women a greater sense of enjoyment and satisfaction with themselves and to break the stereotypes of past images.

"We as women struggle against a societal projection of an ideal that does not have a basis in reality...To attain what our culture says is feminine may actually be a denial of the feminine. And we become hopelessly trapped in the struggle."

Images within Community

In my own work as an artist, I have looked for meaningful images of women within a community which has traditionally sought alternatives to the options of the surrounding culture. In the boxes and albums of old family photographs I find the women who peopled my life, both physically and imaginatively, long before I was inundated with media models.

The women in these photographs, like the grandmothers, aunts and mothers who first filled my world, are energetic and creative people. They were often photographed in the midst of their everyday lives—gardening, sewing, housekeeping—surrounded by family and friends. I can line up one woman's life—babyhood, youth and old age side by side—and observe the physical continuities and changes.

While the lives of these women and their sense of their physical selves were no doubt full of limitations and inhibitions, they nevertheless have a positive reality for me. Their "imperfect forms" are more wholistic concepts of womanhood than the idealized beauties devoid of character that historically and presently dominate our culture.

Susan Shantz is an assemblage artist. She is presently completing a Master's in Religion and Culture at Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario. Her artworks will be exhibited at the Goshen College Art Gallery, March 3-24, 1985.



"Kathe Kollwitz. Self-portrait with a Pencil. 20th century. Kollwitz drew and sculpted her face over 100 times in her life." (Petersen and Wilson, *Women Artists*, p. 119, Fig VI, 49.)

A Prayer to God, who created me as a woman

*Thou it was who didst fashion my inward parts;
thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.
I will praise thee, for thou dost fill me with awe;
wonderful thou art, and wonderful thy works.
Thou knowest me through and through:
my body is no mystery to thee,
how I was secretly kneaded into shape
and patterned in the depths of the earth.
Thou didst see my limbs unformed in the womb,
and in thy book they are all recorded;
day by day they were fashioned
not one of them was late in growing.*

Psalm 139:13-16, New English Translation

You it was, loving creator,
who fashioned my inward parts.
While I was still an embryo in my mother's womb
you knit me together
and lovingly gave me a uterus and ovaries;
a clitoris and vagina.
You gave me two tiny brown kisses for nipples
knowing that in the rightness of time
they would grow into the softness of breasts.
My body is no mystery to you,
'how I was secretly kneaded into shape
and patterned in the depths of the earth'—
the depths of my mother's womb.

I can imagine your joy and delight
as you made me female.
I can also imagine your fear and apprehension,
as you gave me a vagina,
you knew how vulnerable this would make me,
knew the rage and shame which are part of
assault, rape and violation.

I can imagine your yearning as you gave me a clitoris
and surrounded it with a dense network of sensory nerves.
I can imagine your hope that this part of me would
bring me pleasure and joy
and enrich my intimate relationships
and my self-esteem.

I can imagine your dread, too,
for you knew how a woman can feel guilty
about her excitement,
and how she can use her power to be aroused against herself.
You know the isolation and self-hatred
that come from using sexual contact in a way
of punishing oneself.

As you planted my womb within me,
a tiny seed for a tiny female embryo,
I can imagine your hope,
that one day I would conceive,
and experience life growing within me.

I can imagine your grief, too,
if you already knew
that I would not conceive.
You share the piercing anguish felt
by a woman
when she does not bear a child.
You know the grief and sorrow.

As you gave me tiny nipples
I can imagine your hope and your fear:
a fear that I would want to hide my womanhood,
that I might hate the softness of my body.

As you fashioned me and made me female
did your heart already ache
for the pain I might suffer
because of my female body:
the pain and moodiness which is part of the female cycle,
the pain of cervical cancer or fibroids,
the pain of labor and childbirth?

Did you already see the physical scars
and surgical violation of this body
which sickness might bring?

When you fashioned me and shaped me as female
within my mother's womb
you may have wept and grieved for the pain—
spiritual, emotional and physical—
which I would bear as a woman.

And yet you did shape me
and knit my body together,
knead it into its female form.

You knew that none of my experiences
could fully destroy me.

You knew the power within me
to heal myself,

You knew that I could lovingly care for myself
as a mother cares for a precious child.

Help me to feel this loving healing presence within me.
Help me to weep if I have never wept
for my violation and suffering.

Help me to rage and release the anger locked within me
and let it pour forth like molten lava.

Help me to cradle the innocent child I was,
help me to rock and comfort and soothe.

Help me to reach out and touch my mothers,
my sisters, my daughters,
and may touching break down the isolation
which shame and guilt and pain build up.

And as we gently touch and lightly
lay our hands upon each other
may we feel flowing through us
all the strength and power of our womanly hands:
hands that create, hands that feed,
hands that nurture and comfort.

As we gently and lightly
lay our hands upon each other
may we feel the tingling sensitivity of our finger tips,
and the sensitivity and intuition
which makes us compassionate and caring women.

Help us to heal and renew ourselves.

This is your grace, your healing.
This is what gave you the courage
to make us female
deep within our mother's womb.

by Carrie Doehring
written for all of the women
at Five Oaks on Oct. 28-29.

*Carrie Doehring is a Presbyterian minister in
Ontario*

News and Verbs

An ad hoc committee on the role of women in the Canadian Catholic Church reported their findings amidst controversy at the recent annual meeting of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops in Ottawa. The committee, set up by the CCOCB and chaired by **Dr. Elisabeth Labelle** of the University of Ottawa, did not call for the ordination of women. It did, however, catalogue the exclusion women feel from the church's decision-making process, based on mail and personal interviews with over 1,000 Catholic women. It also recommended the acceptance of twelve specific measures which would call for more groundwork and sensitizing of the issues for both clergy and laypersons.

According to *Maclean's* magazine, Toronto's **Emmett Cardinal Carter** "accused the committee of patronizing the bishops and dictating policy to them." Also criticized by various bishops was the report's call to work at removing sexist language from the liturgy.

A compromise version of the committee's report was finally accepted by the bishops; **Labelle** believes, however, that the controversy surrounding the acceptance of such mild measures "will discourage women from participating in church affairs" (*Maclean's*). —From reports in *K-W Record*, Oct. 24, 1984 and in *Maclean's*, Nov. 5, 1984.

Alice Roth has been named Goshen College's first vice president for administrative affairs, beginning in January 1985. **Lee F. Snyder** began a term as interim academic dean at Eastern Mennonite College last summer. These appointments represent the first time senior administrative posts have been filled by women at Goshen and EMC.

Sue Clemmer Steiner finishes her editorship of this newsletter with the current issue. The Women's Concerns *Report* will now be edited by **Emily Will** from

the MCC Akron office. **Sue** says, "I have been grateful for the opportunity to help the networking process for us as Mennonite women through the *Report*. I have been impressed by the thoughtfulness as well as the emotional quality of the material so many of you have written on so many important topics. As I have edited, I have sometimes found myself in tears. My own life has been enriched by what we together have written and published. Best wishes to **Emily** and to the *Report*."

Will the Allegheny Mennonite Conference allow the ordination of women pastors? The issue will have to remain undecided for the time being since too many delegates were absent from a special session called to discuss the issue on Oct. 27 in Scottdale, Pa.

Although a straw poll of those present showed 37 in favor of ordination, 15 opposed and 15 seeking to postpone the decision, the session's convenors felt that the absentees were likely opposed to women's ordination. They did not want to shut them out of the decision-making.

Allegheny Conference, comprised of 37 congregations already has licensed women pastors. But it has not had to deal with the question of women's ordination until University Mennonite Fellowship of State College, Pa. asked earlier this year that its licensed co-pastors, Harold and Ruth Anne Yoder, be ordained.

A discussion about what the Bible has to say about women in ministry revealed divergent interpretations among the delegates. "The Bible definitely points to the ordination of women, said pastor Loren Johns of the Johnstown, Pa. area. "It definitely does not," contested Phil King, a second Johnstown minister.

Delegates will decide who they agree with at another session in March.

—From *Gospel Herald*, Nov. 6, 1984

REPORT is published bi-monthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. It strives to promote this belief through sharing information, concerns and ideas relating to problems and issues which affect the status of women in church and society. Articles and views presented in *REPORT* do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns. Correspondence should be addressed to Editor Emily Will at MCC, 21 South 12th Street, Akron, PA 17501.

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